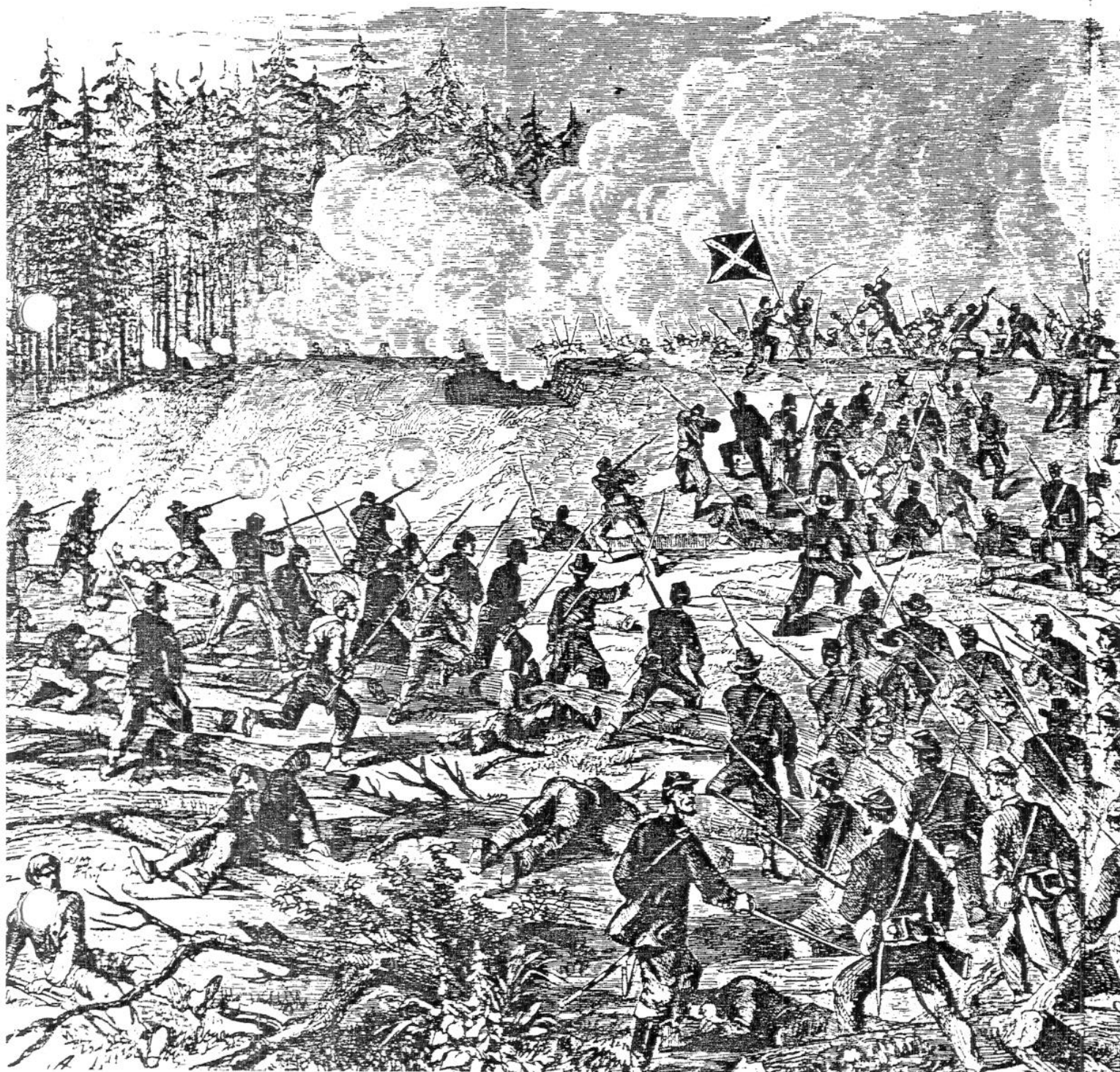


In breaking contact with Lee after Cold Harbor  
and transferring his army east and south of Richmond,  
Grant took an enormous gamble.  
But, after the maneuver succeeded,  
he (or his subordinates) failed to capitalize on the . . .

# . . . Lost Opportunity at Pet



A CWTI Extra

by

Frederic S. Klein

# Petersburg



THERE were many lost opportunities in the campaigns and battles of the Civil War—at Gettysburg, on the Peninsula, at Fredericksburg and at Chancellorsville, but few were so apparent and so difficult to explain away as the first of four fatal days in June of 1864, on the outskirts of Petersburg, Virginia, when a superbly executed movement of Grant's great army stalled, fizzled, and died just when almost certain success was in its grasp.

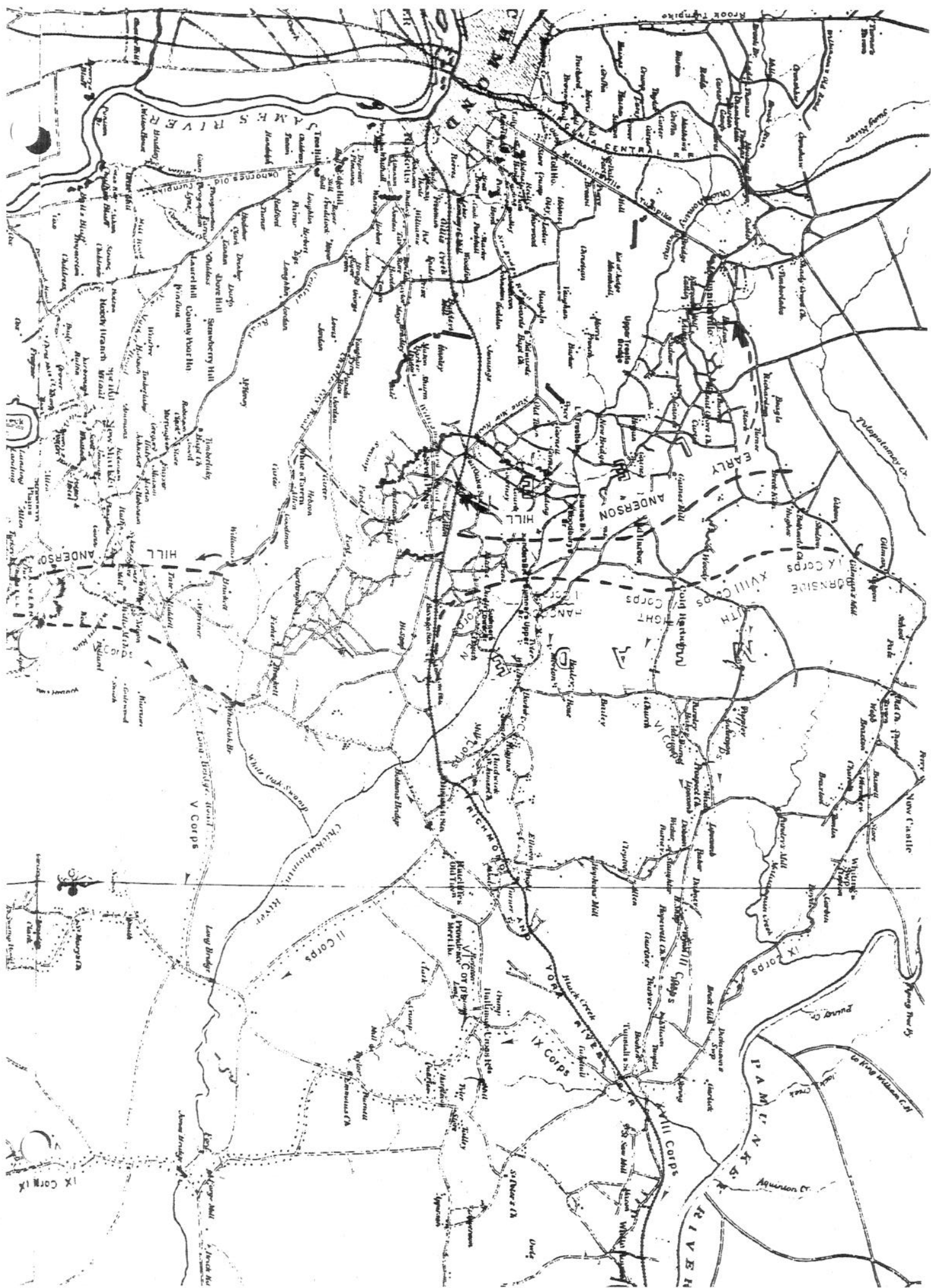
Grant's problem in his change of plans after the ghastly slaughter at Cold Harbor involved an enormous gamble. In every movement of his May campaign toward Richmond, he had been blocked by Lee. Could he possibly hope to deceive Lee, or catch him napping? It seemed doubtful, but it was the only alternative to another costly frontal assault on the formidable defenses surrounding Richmond. He would have to move 100,000 men and equipment away from the enemy lines directly in front of his troops, get them across two rivers—the swampy, meandering Chickahominy and the wide, unbridged James—and occupy Petersburg and its rail connections; all this movement to be made across the old Peninsula battle-grounds without Lee finding out what was going on. If it succeeded, Grant could wait until Lee had to attack. If it failed, while his army was spread out in separate units all the way from Cold Harbor to Petersburg, he might find himself in the same position as McClellan had two years before, with his troops separated by rivers, his supply lines threatened, and his army cut apart piecemeal. Petersburg would be no problem if he could get his army across the James. It had almost been captured in May and was known to be lightly defended. The real threat was that Lee might find out about the movement and strike again from the west near Savage's Station, Frayser's Farm, or Malvern Hill—the old Peninsula line which aroused unpleasant recollections for many Union veterans.

IN THE same way that Magruder had deceived and delayed McClellan in 1862 by pretending that his forces were in full strength although they had actually departed, Grant planned to deceive Lee. Smith's XVIII Corps was pulled out of the northern end of Grant's line, moved to White House on the Pamunkey River on June 13, and placed on transports to move around the Peninsula, down the York and up the James River, apparently to rejoin Butler. They had been sent to Cold Harbor as reinforcements, and their departure, if noticed, would cause no alarm.

*(Text continued on Page 42)*

*A regiment of the 18th Corps carrying a portion of Beauregard's line, in front of Petersburg. (From a sketch by E. F. Mullen from "The Soldier in our Civil War.")*







About the same time, Warren's V Corps, at the southern end of Grant's line, moved away from Cold Harbor and took up a position on the old battleground between White Oak Swamp and Malvern Hill. Warren's movement, preceded by Wilson's cavalry, was not made too obviously, but was not necessarily secret. If Grant was following his previous tactics, it would seem logical for him to cross the Chickahominy and attack Richmond from McClellan's old positions. Wilson's cavalry made no attempt to conceal their presence, and Lee promptly prepared to meet the new situation by one of his old tricks—leaving only one corps to defend his Cold Harbor position, and sending most of his army under Anderson and A. P. Hill to anticipate a new attack in the Malvern Hill area.

But Warren's position was only a screen for the real movement, which was taking place to the rear. Hancock and Wright moved to their rear lines, leaving only enough troops in the front lines to create the normal noises and sounds of activity. The II and V Corps moved south behind Warren, but kept on moving toward the James. Four of Grant's five corps were slipping away from Cold Harbor, and by June 13, Lee was planning to protect a new battleground—but was it to be the battleground?

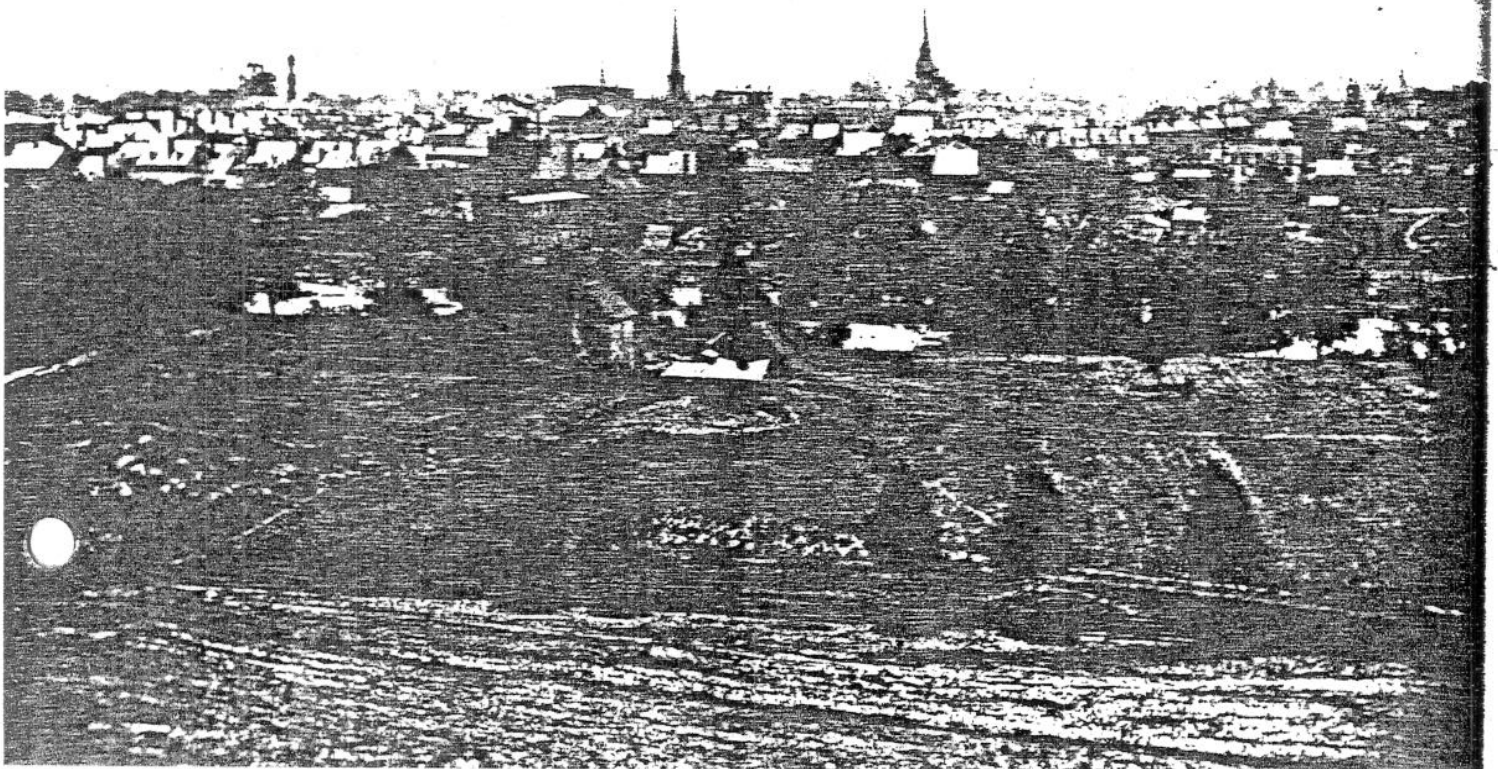
MEANWHILE, Beauregard and Butler had been sparring over Bermuda Hundred and Petersburg for several weeks. They were both impatient with higher authority, over-confident as to their own abilities, and resentful about the withdrawal of their troops during the Cold Harbor battle. Butler was irritated about the Petersburg situation, and claimed that he had

been ready and capable of occupying Petersburg until Smith's corps had been taken away from him. He had sent Gillmore to take the city only a few days before, and Kautz's cavalry had bypassed the forts and entered the outskirts of the city, but Gillmore did not support him and the attempt was a failure.

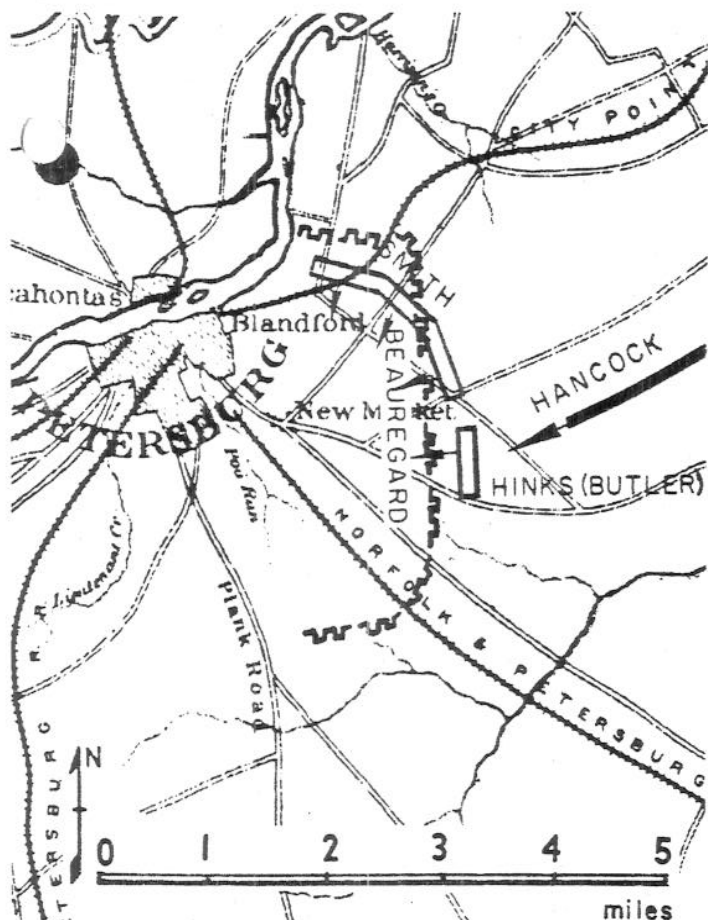
Since Petersburg was in Butler's sector, he was constantly insisting upon its importance and demanding more troops from Grant, but Grant was not worried about not being able to take Petersburg. However, he did give Butler a significant and important assignment in connection with his secret movement across the Peninsula—he was to have a pontoon bridge ready for the crossing of the James River by June 14, bridging 2,000 feet of water in a tidewater area. It was one of the greatest engineering feats of the war, and between late afternoon and midnight on June 14 the bridge was completed, without any word of it having reached the Confederates. Smith's XVIII Corps disembarked from their transports at Point of Rocks and crossed the Appomattox River early on the morning of the 15th, eight miles from Petersburg.

General Beauregard was also disgruntled with his higher echelon. His army, under his "Department of

*View of Petersburg, Virginia, "the Cockade City" as it was called, with its European type slanted rooftops and gables, its church steeples, all apparently rainwashed before the picture was made, as evidenced by the water rivulets and ditch at the edge of the field in the foreground. The fieldstone farmhouse reminds us that a hundred years ago, farmers could look with alarm at the growing city and hope they would not be overrun by progress. (NA)*

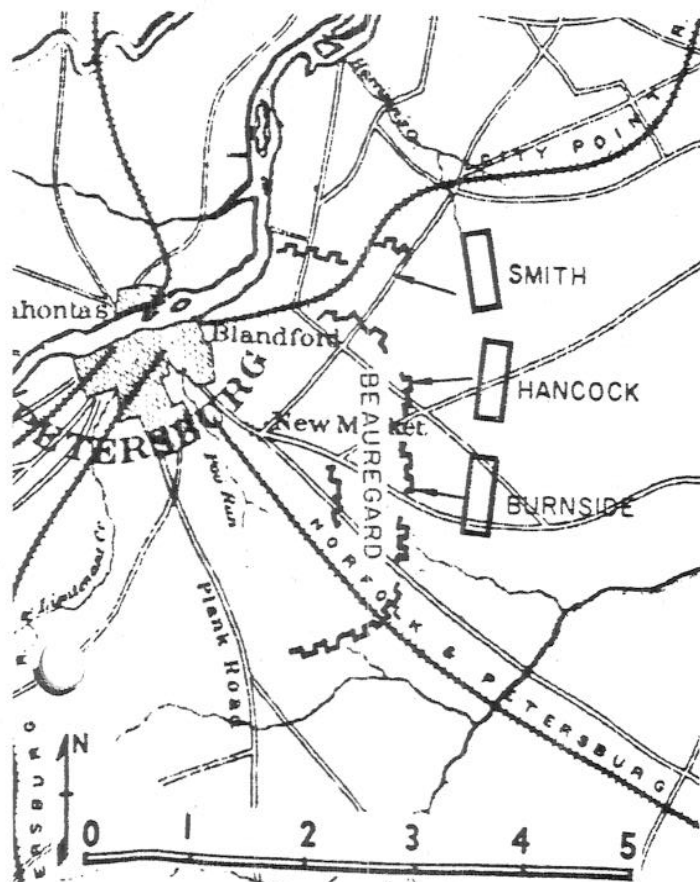






This map, basically the same as the movement map, shows the general positions at about 7 p.m., June 15, 1864.

The Federal attacks on June 16, 1864.



tween and few riflemen to protect the gunners. The defenders had gained a little practice the week before, but now an entire army corps was forming along the line, with the morning skirmishes as a warning.

Shortly after noon, Smith's troops were in formation near the Jordan house, in rough, wooded territory, facing annoying artillery fire across an open field. The fire was not heavy, but it had to be silenced before the infantry could move out. Artillery batteries duelling in the open are fairly evenly matched, but when one side has its artillery and gunners protected even by crude earthworks, its advantage is increased enormously. In the open, the gun, the carriage, the caissons, and the gunners are all suitable targets, but the chance of a lucky hit on a target no bigger than the black protruding muzzle of a gun hidden by earthworks is really rare. Union artillery was brought up over the rough ground, positions were determined and allocated, and troops assembled at the most favorable points for an attack.

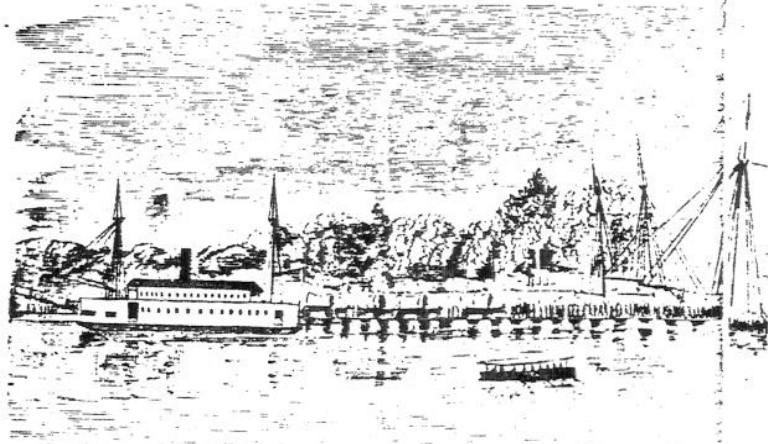
ALL this took time, but it is still hard to explain why no action of any significance took place along the line from 1:30 until 7:30 that evening. "Baldy" Smith was roundly criticized by Butler and others for this delay, but he may have had special reasons for caution. Barely a week had passed since Smith's men had been ordered to Cold Harbor, to charge without prior reconnaissance or coordination into a deadly crossfire of artillery and infantry from protective earthworks. Here at Petersburg, Smith had no engineer's report of the enemy's disposition or of the terrain, and perhaps it can be understood why he undertook the reconnaissance himself that afternoon, rather than plunge ahead again, blindly and hastily, against fortifications that might be another deceptive trap. Later, Butler said that Smith's curse was that he had graduated as a topographical engineer and always had to make maps before making assaults. In any event, the delays on the afternoon and evening of June 15 were disastrous for the success of Grant's grand strategy.

The reconnaissance completed, by 7 o'clock Generals Hinks and Brooks (on Hinks's right) were ordered to advance on the enemy lines, and within twenty minutes the first line of Confederate works had been broken. The Negro soldiers charged Battery No. 7, split to the right and left in front of the works, and entered the battery position from the open rear. Many of the battery positions were redans or lunettes, open in the rear, which made it easy for the defenders to enter or leave, and to move artillery, but also made them vulnerable to rear attacks if the enemy broke through the rifle pits which stretched in front of and between the forts. From Battery No. 7, the troops could now fire on nearby Battery No. 8, while other



*"Hinks's Division of Negro infantry bringing in the guns captured from the Confederates at Baylor's Farm near Petersburg, Va., June 15th, 1864." (From a sketch by E. F. Mullen in "The Soldier in our Civil War")*

This pontoon bridge across the James River was one of the engineering feats of the Civil War. It bridged 2,000 feet of water in boggy tidewater country. Grant ordered General Butler to have the bridge ready by June 14. By the skill of the Union engineers, led by Gen. Henry Washington Benham, the bridge was constructed between afternoon and midnight of June 14. Smith's corps crossed it early in the morning of the 15th. This Edwin Forbes sketch is captioned, "The Army of the Potomac Crossing the James River June 14, 1864." From "The Soldier in our Civil War."





units moved into a deep ravine behind the works and captured No. 8. No. 9 was next, and before sundown a wide breach in the front defense line had been made between Batteries No. 3 and No. 11 and the road into Petersburg was apparently open. Smith announced to Butler, "Unless I misapprehend the topography, I hold the key to Petersburg." However, he soon lost the key.

**TO MAKE** the situation even better, Hancock and the II Corps had just arrived on the scene. Almost 30,000 veterans now faced the few thousand irregulars who had abandoned the center of their defense line. But while Smith had been making his reconnaissance in the afternoon, Hancock had been having some frustrating administrative foul-ups. Hancock's corps had been the first to arrive overland from Cold Harbor, and had crossed the James by ferry on the afternoon and evening of June 14, while the pontoon bridge was being constructed. They were at Wilcox's Landing with orders from Meade to secure and issue 60,000 rations which would be sent to them at Windmill Point, and then move toward Petersburg to take up a position at the City Point Railroad and Harrison's Creek.

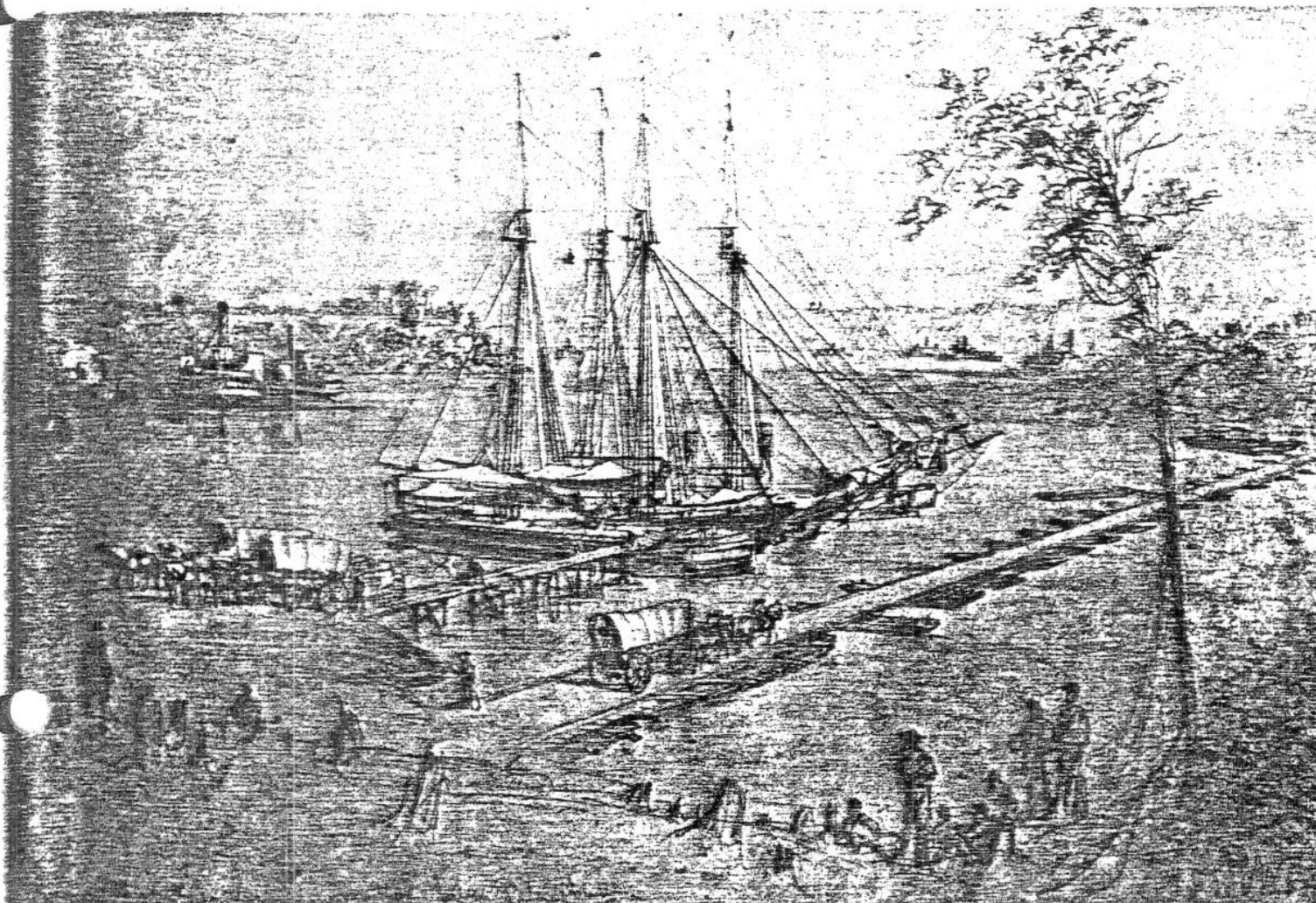
This is where much of the foul-up began. In the first place, Windmill Point was five miles from Wilcox's

Landing; next, Hancock was to wait for the arrival and issue of the rations; third, he was ordered to move to a position, but with no instructions to assist Smith; and finally, as often happened with military instructions, the assigned crossroads position was not where it was supposed to be. It seems apparent that Grant had not told Meade everything about his plans, perhaps never suspecting that Smith would need help, or perhaps so intent on getting his army across the river that he ignored the possibility that Hancock might be useful at Petersburg. At any rate, all Hancock knew was that he was to wait for three days' rations. They were not badly needed, because he had rations, but this was the army.

**THE** II Corps had crossed the James by 3 a.m. of the 15th, and by six o'clock there was still no sign of rations. At nine o'clock there was a rumor that they had arrived, but the rumor was false. Finally, by 10:30, Meade authorized Hancock to move on without the rations. At this moment, of course, the schooner *Susan* arrived with the missing rations, too late to be issued. But the poor, slow, confused *Susan* had kept Hancock waiting seven hours at the wrong spot, until he moved off without the hardtack, which was sent to City Point.

By three o'clock in the afternoon, Hancock was still in the wrong spot. Graysville was not on his map—perhaps they meant Gray's Tavern. Bailey's Creek was

*"Pontoon bridge on the Appomattox, below Petersburg. Point of Rocks, Butler's Headquarters." (Alfred Waud Drawing)*





in the wrong place. Harrison's Creek would have been within the Confederate lines, if he had found it. He reported that he would go on his own and give up trying to travel by his map. Finally he arrived near Smith's position, just as the Confederate defenses were broken and the battery positions captured. It was a beautiful clear evening, and apparently a marvelous opportunity to end the day with a quick skirmish and the triumphal occupation of Petersburg.

However, Hancock the "Superb" was not feeling very superb. His annoying old Gettysburg wound in the groin had bothered him at Cold Harbor and was still giving him pain. His recent experiences at Cold Harbor must have distressed him too, for that ghastly *melée* had culminated in the reluctance of both officers and men to obey orders to attempt another advance. Now, for the first time, he learned from Smith that an attack on Petersburg defenses was the reason for his presence there.

IN THE meantime, Beauregard's cries of "Wolf!" had not received any serious attention, but Lee did agree to return Hoke's division, which had been taken from Beauregard for the defense of Drewry's Bluff. Lee was still not ready to believe that Grant's army was anywhere but on the Peninsula. As for Beauregard, he wanted more troops for the double duty of protecting both Bermuda Hundred and Petersburg, but he did not want Lee on hand to overshadow him.

Butler's signal stations could keep watch on the road and railroad leading into Petersburg from the north, and reported no major movement of troops throughout the day, but there was constant apprehension that Lee might discover Grant's strategy and block him at Petersburg. It was not until about 7 o'clock that Hagood's South Carolinians arrived, followed by most of Hoke's division, to take positions along the inner lines and dig in during the night.

The meeting of Hancock and Smith turned out to be a puzzling Alphonse and Gaston exchange of subtle formalities. Hancock was senior in rank, but as a new arrival on the field, without combat instructions or information about the day's events, requested Smith to make the necessary decisions as to action. Smith promptly asked Hancock to relieve his XVIII Corps

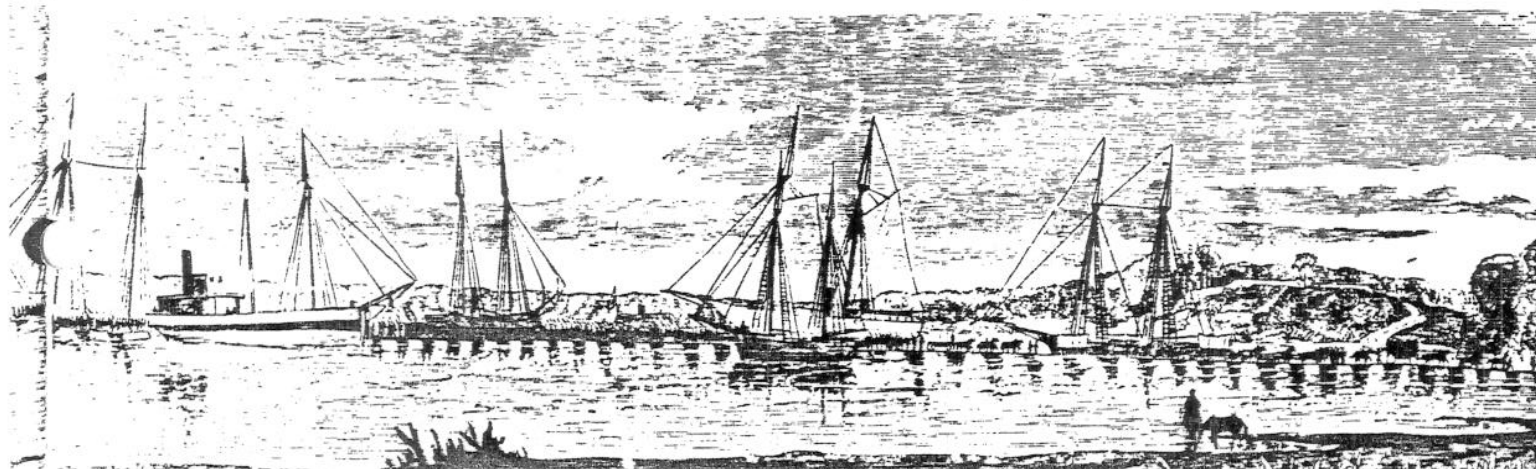
in the lines, and to defer any further attacks until the transfer had taken place. It was well after midnight before the slow, stumbling process of moving 15,000 men out of their positions and replacing them with 20,000 new arrivals could take place. In the meantime, rumors of the reinforcements that had reached Beauregard became wildly exaggerated. Was the arrival of Hoke's division the vanguard of Lee's entire army?

WHEN Hancock got his troops in the line, he instructed Birney and Gibbon to make sure that if they found the enemy occupying any commanding positions, they should attack at once, but it was not until six o'clock in the morning that Birney and Gibbon advanced, only to find that the enemy reinforcements had really arrived and had built some formidable earthworks.

The night had passed peacefully. Smith had found a secluded spot and slept oblivious to Butler's messages; and Hancock, who had gone through a frustrating day, planned a coordinated attack for the 16th. Many of Hancock's veterans were unhappy over the delay. They had been anxious for two days, wondering if Lee would be at Petersburg to meet them, but the news that the new recruits of the Negro regiments had captured eighteen guns and five fortifications seemed to indicate that Petersburg was practically defenseless.

The night wore on, and one artilleryman described the anger of the men at the delay of the attack until the next day, when it was almost certain that Lee's army would have arrived. "The rage of the intelligent enlisted men was devilish. The most blood-curdling blasphemy I ever listened to I heard that night, uttered by the men who knew they would be sacrificed on the morrow." At dawn on the 16th, the situation looked as formidable as they had feared, as they gazed across a wide bare space, cut by long brown lines of entrenchments, in front of high walled redoubts with silent gun muzzles protruding from the earthworks.

The handful of Confederates had not been sleeping. Beauregard, impatient at the lack of response to his appeals for more troops, made his own decision, without authorization, to withdraw Bushrod Johnson's division from the Bermuda Hundred defenses and bring them to Petersburg overnight. By morning he



*The forts and breastworks, near Petersburg, captured by the 18th Army Corps, Gen. W. F. Smith, June 15th, 1864." ("The Soldier in our Civil War")*

had about 10,000 instead of 2,200 men, although the odds were lengthened by the arrival of Burnside's IX Corps, bringing Union strength to about 50,000. Still, five to one was better than nine to one, and the Confederates held strong defensive positions. The odds were going to be satisfactory to them for many months.

GRANT'S real opportunity had been lost. He had placed Hancock in command on the 16th, and planned his attack with three corps. It was six o'clock in the evening before all units had been moved into position, and a short but severe engagement near the Hare house had resulted in the capture of three additional fortifications at the cost of heavy Union casualties. June 17 was almost a repetition of the 16th. Burnside's corps penetrated the Confederate lines, found Bushrod Johnson well entrenched, and the inner defense line held again.

And now Lee finally learned that Beauregard had been right and that Grant was not on the Peninsula, but south of the James River. Rooney Lee found out about the pontoon bridge, and even discovered an announcement that Petersburg had been captured. Kershaw and A. P. Hill were ordered to Petersburg at once. Through the night of the 17th, Lee and his army were taking positions along a strong new line of works behind the old battery line. The last chance to



take advantage of Grant's strategy was on June 18, but it was far too late.

After the new Confederate line was discovered, plans were made for a great coordinated attack by four corps along the whole line at 12 o'clock, but the coordination failed. Hancock, now suffering severely from his old wound, had been relieved. Birney, Warren, Wright, and Burnside could not seem to get together for a uniform attack, even though watches had been synchronized.

It was four o'clock before the advance over the old Confederate works toward the new line took place, but now they faced Lee's army. A Union artillery captain described one of the day's attacks by writing,







"To those of us who had anxiously watched all morning the preparations for our reception, and had seen some of the guns moved into position and troops deployed behind the breastworks, it seemed perfectly evident that the charge would now prove a disastrous failure . . . I shall never forget the hurricane of shot and shell which struck as we emerged from the belt of trees. I understood the fierceness of the fire to which we were being subjected; saw that we were receiving not only the fire from the works in our front, to which we were entitled, but a crossfire from troops and artillery on our right and left which would have been directed to other parts of our charging lines if we had been supported."

LIKE many Civil War operations, the attack was uncoordinated and without specific instructions or definite objectives. It became a half-hearted demonstration, and by six o'clock Meade notified Grant that nothing further could be done. Warren is reputed to have said, "It's too late to change plans—let's make a noise anyway!" Casualties were heavy, and the 1st Maine Regiment had charged across an open field toward Confederate works, losing 75 percent of its men in seven minutes. From this day on, flank movements along the line from the south toward the west of Petersburg were to occupy the armies as they settled down to siege rather than assault. There were to be other attacks, but the great opportunity of June 15 was ended by June 18.

Few of the commanders involved in the lost opportunity of the first day at Petersburg were inclined to say very much about it, with the exception of Butler, who had been very critical of Smith for some time, and continued to denounce him. In retrospect, many could be blamed, but the censure could be well distributed. Grant had attached so much importance to the execution of his secret movement south across the James that he paid little attention to the minor problem of taking Petersburg, which he assumed could be done easily. Butler had several chances to occupy Petersburg before June 15. Meade was apparently unaware of the situation at Petersburg and gave Hancock no instructions as to what to do when he got there. Smith was over-cautious during the afternoon and evening of the 15th, but he was certainly aware that if Grant's scheme had been discovered, his XVIII Corps would be the ones to walk into the trap, and Cold Harbor was fresh in his mind. As for Hancock, while many tried to blame him both for being late and for not taking charge as soon as he arrived and

*Battery B, 1st Pa. Artillery in action before Petersburg. Man in civilian clothes standing on mound in center of photo is Mathew Brady. (L.C.)*

